Gabrielle Anonuevo-Carreon

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Personal Connections – How Attached Should Players be to a Game?

Abstract

Identity is important to people. Video games allow players to take on a variety of identities, whether it be a pre-determined main character, selecting characters from a roster, creating their own, or even commanding game characters, etc. Players are immersed in whichever role they take on in any genre of game. Being able to find a piece of media and identifying with it creates engagement, it forms a connection between the player and the game resulting in an attachment to it. The objective of this deep dive is to understand how this attachment is formed, how it impacts the life of the player with the attachment, and if designers should want this attachment. When designing games, creating player engagement is important. Being able to understand how potential players will interact/react to the content can help the design process.

Introduction

People love being able to identify with the media that they are consuming whether they are watching someone's actions through a movie/show, reading their thoughts through a book, or living out their choices and actions through a game. Video games provide incredible experiences to their audience that can cause players to form personal connections and attachments to the game itself, its world, and its characters. Connecting on a personal level with any form of media is often sought out. Identity is important to people, but there are times when people can become dependent on this media and form a deeper attachment to it.

This deep dive centres around the identity and connection that players form towards games/characters/game worlds. The information gathered in this study looks at:

- Forming attachments to games/characters/worlds.
- Games that encourage this behaviour.
- How attachment to games affects people.

- Designing with player attachment in mind.

How do people make connections?

Humans often form and have relationships with objects they encounter in their daily lives. These objects that they form relationships with often take on unique agencies. In video games, players tend to have human-like agencies of avatars which then potentially leads to rich player-avatar relationships (PARs) (Mallon). Avatars are prominent digital objects that people engage with in digital discourse. They are interactive, graphic, and social representations of people in a digital space (Mallon). Avatars in an online space can include screen names, profile pictures, in-game characters, etc. Since an in-game character is the primary link between players and the game world, the connection between players and the avatar they are controlling is important to understanding human behaviour and communication in these spaces.

Identifying with Fiction

Humans identifying or taking on the role of fictional characters is not new. Most theories on audience responses to characters in media rely on the fundamental assumption that the user/person experiences themselves and the media persona as two distinct social entities (Hefner, Klimmt, Vorderer, 2). When looking at human identification, the concept of 'the self' in social psychology is often brought up or discussed. Current theories on 'the self' and self-concept no longer envision them as a stable construct, instead, they are seen as state-sensitive and malleable depending on the situation (Hefner, Klimmt, Vorderer, 2). As media grows and becomes more prevalent in the daily lives of people, it begins to largely impact people's behaviours and characteristics. When people interact with media, whether they are watching a movie/show, reading a book, playing a game, etc., during that moment of media exposure, users adopt the identity of the target character. They perceive or imagine themselves to be that character and then alter their self-concept to match that character. The new identity the user has created through the character becomes a temporary alteration of the user's self-perception by including the perceived properties of the character (Hefner, Klimmt, Vorderer, 3). When users take on the role of a character this is often referred to as identity tourism (Linden). This is often a temporary identity users have while playing where they adopt traits of characters while experiencing their lives through them. For instance, if they were playing a character that was meant to be brave, the player may actively make more brave choices while playing. Depending on how close of a connection the player feels to this character and how long they are immersed in the role this can start to seep into their daily behaviour.

Why make these connections?

Some key reasons people can form these connections with media are relating to real-life experiences, escapism, and community. There are numerous games that provide real-life experiences to players. Games such as *That Dragon Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), retell life

experiences that many can relate to or empathize with. Games like these effectively grab onto people's emotions allowing them to create an emotional bond with the game.

Even if the player may not have lived this experience, it is familiar enough that they can still relate leaving a lasting impact on them. This forms a personal connection between the game and the player. Many narrative-based games achieve this with the stories relayed from games with the intention of leaving a lasting impression on the player. Another common argument on these changes to the users' self-concept is the recognition of escapism as motivation for entertainment. In movies, television shows, books, etc., users have a limit to how immersed in the experience they can become. In those forms of media, the user is always observing the actions of the character, however, this is not the same in video games or other interactive media. In games, players assume the role of the character they are given and can interact with the environment and story. Giving users more agency in an experience creates the potential for larger immersion which can create a stronger connection to the media. *The Sims* franchise (Electronic Arts, 2000) achieves this by giving players a space to freely create a world to their liking. Giving players the freedom to do as they wish in a game with no consequences provides a large opportunity for escapism. Whether players choose to recreate moments or sims from their lives or create new imaginary scenarios, they are fostering a new world that they are putting a significant amount of time into.

Players can get attached to their Sim world since it is something that they have created and can control, this is where the connection between the game and the player is formed. Beyond the content provided by media, people strive to sort themselves into groups and form a community amongst similar individuals. Automatically when people interact with one another they subconsciously sort each other as a member of their ingroup or outgroup. An ingroup is a social category or group that they strongly identify with. An outgroup is the opposite, it is a social category or group that they do not identify with (Giles 142). When players associate themselves with a game or a franchise, they would consider themselves a fan, this creates the ingroup of those in the fandom versus those that are not. Creating this ingroup community allows these individuals to create and form bonds with each other. The relationships formed with other members of the community create a stronger connection to the mutual media they are fans of resulting in a lasting personal connection.

How do games encourage this?

There are several ways that games encourage this behaviour from their players, some of the main ways are through the game's genre and its objective and through the community fostered around the game. With users forming attachments and identifying with characters in games, as games have developed, the role of *characterization* has evolved with it. According to Mallon, there are three types of relationships involving users and game characters:

1. Player and Avatar (the puppet standing for the player in their interactions in the game).

2. Player and non-player character (character not controlled by a player, but by the computer using artificial intelligence).

3. Non-player character and non-player character.

Single-Player Games

Many single-player games work towards forming these kinds of relationships with their game and the player. *Nintendogs* (Nintendo, 2005) has players assume the role of a pet owner and aims to foster a meaningly relationship between the two. The game immediately forms a bond with the player by giving it something to care for and look after. This is further strengthened by having the friendship between the pet and the player decrease if the pet is neglected.

The main purpose of the game is to form a relationship between the game character (pet) and the player (the owner) and it is relatively successful at doing this. Other games that purposefully aim to create a bond between game characters and a user are dating simulators. Most of these games are heavily narrative driven and they will create characters that are compelling and attractive to users. Games such as *Mystic Messenger* (Cheritz, 2016), is a highly successful dating simulator that achieves in forming a bond with a user. Like other dating simulators, the game provides a variety of characters to interact with and provides an interesting story that attracts players. However, the game uses a mechanic of phone calls to highlight the importance of forming a bond with a character. After taking part in certain chat events or visual novel sequences, even if the app is closed, a character may call the user.

The user must pick up the call within ten seconds, otherwise, they will miss the call and will need to pay an in-game currency to see that call. Accepting the call does not really impact the overall story of the game, it is mainly additional content for users. Despite this, players who have become invested or attached to characters strive to always answer these calls, not wanting to miss out on any content. This phone call function slowly begins to blend reality and the game as players feel the need to accept the call as if it were real. Like Nintendogs, to foster a meaningful relationship between the game and a user, the player is given responsibilities that are highlighted as urgent and important because of the consequences of neglecting them.

Multiplayer Games

Mallon only highlights the importance of a user and the game and does not highlight the relationship that can be formed between a player and another player. Mallon strictly looks at single-player experiences and how that impacts user attachment to games, however, multiplayer experiences can still impact users similarly. Online multiplayer games, such as *Final Fantasy XIV* (Square Enix, 2010) allow players to design/create their own characters and they can interact with other players within the game. Letting users create their own character directly gives users a form of self-identification online as it will represent them in the game space. That connection to their character can allow them to be more immersed in the role they are taking on.

The self-concept formed through this character may no longer feel temporary as the online character is a direct representation of their self. Beyond creating their own character, the community that can be fostered in an online space can further tie character identity to a user. In Final Fantasy XIV, players can form guilds and parties to play together where they can take on roles. This in addition to having their own character creates a deeper immersion for the players that results in a deeper personal connection to their character and the game. Other games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009), provide a plethora of characters for players to choose from and assume the role of. Although this may not seem as personal as creating your own character, League of Legends has divided characters into different in-game roles that determine a user's play style.

In addition to that, each character has their own unique set of skills which further impacts a user's play style. Most players will adopt a few game roles that they enjoy playing and a few characters that they will contribute time to learning. The longer the player learns and plays the character, they begin to feel a closer connection to said character. This is essentially the idea of having a 'main' in a game, which is just a character they primarily use.

Community Encourages Connections

As previously mentioned, beyond the provided content in a game, a community heavily contributes to the connections formed between players and a game. Fostering a community between players can greatly attract new players and keep current players engaged with the content. Developer Hoyoverse is an example of a game company that actively encourages community between their player bases. Hoyolab, launched in 2021, is a forum website that allows players to post fan-related content about the developer's games (i.e. Genshin Impact, Honkai Impact 3rd, Honkai Star Rail, etc.). When the website was initially launched, players were encouraged to create posts on the website and were incentivized by being rewarded in-game items from posting. The website allows players to easily connect with each other and share content pertaining to their similar interests with each other. This effectively creates an ingroup community for the game's players. Website users can easily identify members of their ingroup and can begin to form a connection.

Since the content posted on the website is mostly related to games made by Hoyoverse, this farms content for the game and keeps players engaged outside of playing. Regarding communities formed for other games, they are often hosted on external social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Tumblr, etc. Although these communities are not extrinsically fostered by the developers, they are still very effective in creating ingroups for their players. Content is still formed by players to keep others engaged with the game and invested in it. This strengthens whatever previous connection they may have had to the game.

How does attachment affect people?

When players develop attachments to their game characters, these perceived relationships are reinforced because players actively take on the role of that character. They actively induce the actions the character makes and suffer the consequences. Character attachment (CA) is reinforced in games because of these interactions. According to Banks, CA consists of four dimensions:

1. Identification: seeing oneself as similar to or the same as the game character.

2. Control: feeling a strong sense of governance over the avatar's actions.

3. Suspension of Disbelief (SoD): accepting the virtual world as real.

4. Responsibility: feeling obligation to ensure the avatar's well-being.

This perspective of CA considers the closest connection between player and character to be unification. When players have formed a close relationship with a character this can lead to the development of a parasocial relationship between the two. When talking about forming relationships, Badejo and Okorie reference Aristotle's philosophy on forming genuine friendships. He states that genuine friendship is formed based on goodness. Friendship based on goodness means that the two people engaging in this relationship see each other as good. They have mutual respect and aim to be like them to an extent (Badejo and Okorie, 54). When a friendship based on goodness only goes one way, this is how a parasocial relationship can be formed. One person sees the connection as genuine but the other may not even know they exist (Farokhmanesh). Parasocial relationships are often talked about regarding fans and celebrities or online personalities, however, this would apply the same between a person and fictional characters. If a player admires a game character and sees them as good or has attributes that they wish to incorporate into their habits, they can form a genuine friendship with this character. This leads the player to see that character as a real person and thus creates a parasocial connection. Players will treat that character as if they are a real person. Treating them as a genuine friend would mean that they wish to replicate attributes of this character into their personality. Players may then begin to change their behaviours to match this. Actions that the character carries out are treated as if they were a real person conducting those actions, if that character were to die, they would grieve. The life of this character can greatly impact the state of the player.

Should games do foster this behaviour?

Determining whether games should do this is rather difficult. There are a lot of factors that contribute to players forming this attachment as well as factors that encourage designers to make these design decisions. As mentioned previously, humans naturally look to form connections with things, people, media, objects, etc., regardless of how conscious a designer might be about this, there is still a high chance of this personal connection forming. However, knowing that is it human nature to do this, dark design patterns can encourage this behaviour to

be fostered to a higher extent. Dark design patterns are often used to increase player engagement with a game and to keep them returning. This effectively creates a connection for the player to the game as the behaviour or action encouraged by these dark patterns becomes an obligation to the player.

What questions should I ask myself when designing?

When designing in the future, there are a couple of questions that I think are important to address with knowing all the above information.

1. What is the intended experience of this product?
    a. How does that impact the way it is presented to players?
2. How do I want players to respond to it?
    a. What should they take away from this interaction?
3. Are there any ways I can mitigate the level of attachment formed?
    a. How can I avoid using dark design patterns that foster this behaviour?

These questions do not solve this problem and it is very difficult to gauge how each player will respond to the content presented to them. Despite this, these questions are aimed at helping designers consciously think about the connections their game can form with their audience. It is important to think about the purpose of the content you as a designer are putting forth and the intended impact you want to leave on your players.

Conclusion

The question of whether games should foster deep connections with their players raises a lot of ethical questions. Is it okay to design games knowing that they can affect players this way? There is no clear answer to this question, as mentioned above it is hard to gauge exactly how players will interact and respond to the game content. Moving forward, when designing, it is important to consider the information presented here in this deep dive and hopefully, it will help to strike a healthy balance between having too little and too much player attachment. As games continue to develop and change, understanding players and their behaviour can help the design process allowing designer to deliver their desired product to its fullest.

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